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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

**Kerr, Gayle & Proud, William** (2005) Hiring Graduates: Perspectives from Advertising and Public Relations Employers. In Purchase, S (Ed.) *ANZ-MAC 2005: Broadening the Boundaries: Conference Proceedings*, 5 December - 7 December 2005, Australia, Western Australia, Fremantle.

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## **Hiring Graduates: Perspectives From Advertising And Public Relations Employers**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at employer expectations of advertising and public relations graduates seeking an entry level position. For employers in both disciplines, the top three priorities are the same generic skills – communications skills, personality traits and strategic or analytical thinking. However, some significant differences were observed, with PR practitioners assigning more importance to practical aspects such as experience in the field and internships. Public relations employers also tend to think that advertising graduates require less strategic skills than public relations graduates. Advertising practitioners generally considered the skills of entry level recruits to be more consistent across the two disciplines.

### **Introduction and Purpose**

The marketing communication disciplines of advertising and public relations have much in common. Both are used strategically to promote goods or services. Both underscore the importance of understanding the stakeholders in the communication process and the value of building image and credibility for the organization. Often times, both co-exist in the same university school or faculty. And sometimes, both advertising and public relations students are competing for the same job.

This paper looks at whether there are different barriers to entry to the two disciplines. The goal is to examine employer expectations of advertising and public relations graduates applying for an entry-level position. It seeks to highlight similarities and explore differences, and in doing so, rank the recruitment priorities for entry level hiring in the advertising and public relations disciplines.

This study is important because few studies have focused on employer desires in hiring staff in the discipline-specific areas of advertising or public relations (Kerr and Moran, 2000; Garcia, 1996). The employer is an important stakeholder in the educational process. Their collaboration in course design is a promise often made to attract students and attest to the real-world validity of the university programs. In addition, this collaboration is often driven to meet accreditation requirements such as the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) which encourages stakeholder consultation as a measure of program improvement (Young and Murphy 2003).

Furthermore, the clarification of employer expectations and the ranking of recruitment priorities may avoid inappropriate employment matches, lower retrenchment rates and minimize the necessity for induction, company socialization and on-the-job training. In addition, this study may allow students to position themselves in relation to business needs, clarify career goals and enamor themselves with necessary skills to be job ready (Scholarlos, Lockyer and Johnson, 2003).

## Literature Review

An advertising or public relations student usually develops both generic skills and discipline-specific skills throughout his or her university years. Generic skills advocated by an Australian Higher Education Council Report (AHEC, 1992) include “critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, problem solving, logical and independent thought, effective communication and related skills in identifying, assessing and managing information, personal attributes such as intellectual rigor, creativity and imagination and values such as ethical practice, integrity and tolerance” (p.21).

These generic skills are typically enhanced by those relating to a specific discipline. McCorkle et al (2001) proposed a skills development framework which includes generic skills such as personal characteristics and support skills, as well as discipline related knowledge and discipline related skills. These vocational skills are highly sought by employers, as on-the-job training is an expensive process and many employers are reluctant to invest in training new recruits (Garcia, 1996; Ducoffe and Ducoffe 1990 in Burge, 1996). Table 1 summarizes the key literature to date on employer expectations of university, business and advertising graduates.

**Table 1: Summary of Employer Expectations of Graduates**

	Smith, Wolsten, Southern 1989 in Burge1996	Floyd and Gordon 1998	Bull and Waldersee 1999	Kerr and Moran 2000	Aust Higher Education Council 1992
Communication	X	X	X	X	X
Discipline specific knowledge	X	X	X	X	
Discipline specific skills			X	X	
Analytical thinking	X	X	X	X	X
Research			X	X	X
Intelligence				X	X
Responsibility					X
Leadership			X		
Imagination					X
Flexibility			X		
Interpersonal	X	X	X	X	X
Self knowledge					X
Conflict resolution					X
Goal achievement			X	X	X
Direction			X	X	
Knowledge of company/industry				X	

To synthesize the findings of the five studies presented in Table 1, there is consistent demand from employers for core skills such as communication skills, vocational or discipline knowledge, analytical thinking and interpersonal skills (Smith, Wolsten and Southern, 1989; Floyd and Gordon, 1998; Bull and Waldersee, 1999; Kerr and Moran, 2000; Australian Higher Education Council, 1992). Three of these studies

further suggest that these requirements are enhanced by research skills, goal achievement, direction, leadership and intelligence (Bull and Waldersee, 1999; Kerr and Moran, 2000; Australian Higher Education Council, 1992). Specifically in the advertising vocation, discipline specific skills and knowledge of the company and the industry are also valued (Kerr and Moran, 2000). In terms of experience, work experience is preferable to none, but only industry experience improves job selection (Floyd and Gordon, 1998). Industry preparedness can be boosted by internship placements and real world projects (Floyd and Gordon, 1998; Kerr and Moran, 2000).

Two studies have looked specifically at the advertising field (Garcia, 1996; Kerr and Moran, 2000). Garcia (1996) found that employers preferred a degree in advertising that is business-based, observing “The skills that should be enhanced in an advertising student are his creative thinking, oral communication and planning ability” (1996, p.67).

The second study, conducted in Australia, reported that employers value generic skills such as communication skills, analytical thinking, problem solving, interpersonal skills, research, computing skills. In addition to the generic skills identified, they expect an understanding of the advertising industry, the role of the agency, consumer behaviour, strategic thinking, knowledge of how advertising works, proficiency in media and writing ability (Kerr and Moran, 2000). While we have some understanding of the expectations of employers in the advertising industry, we have no comparative data for their public relations counterparts. Therefore, this research asks the following questions:

1. What do advertising employers and public relations employers require in a graduate seeking an entry level position?
2. How are their recruitment priorities ranked?

## **Methodology**

The closed-ended questionnaire asked respondents to rate the importance (from one *very important* to five *not important at all*) of eleven items that related to hiring entry level personnel in advertising and public relations firms. The items on the questionnaire were taken from a twice tested instrument (Rose and Miller, 1994; Rose, 1994).

A database of senior decision makers in advertising and public relations firms was assembled from professional associations, industry press, the AdNews Handbook and a university database. In total, 240 names and positions of senior advertising and public relations consultants were collated and checked through telephone calls. A mailout was sent out, followed by an email blast two weeks later. The resulting 87 responses were gathered (43 advertising and 44 public relations), yielding a response rate of 36%.

## **Findings**

Table 1 shows the ranking of criteria for an entry level hire by advertising and public relations practitioners, as well as its percentage of importance. This is then discussed further in terms of education, experience and generic skills.

**Table 2: Ranking of employer expectations for an entry level hire**

Ranking	Importance to Advertising Employers	Importance to Public Relations Employers
1	Communication skills (88.3%)	Communication skills (90.9%)
2	Personality traits (81.4%)	Personality traits (90.9%)
3	Analytical thinking (79%)	Analytical thinking (84.1%)
4	Specific discipline knowledge (67.4%)	Experience in the field (79.5%)
5	Research skills (58.2%)	University degree (65.9%)
6	Specific industry course (53.5%)	Research skills (65.9%)
7	University degree (51.1%)	Internship (65.9%)
8	Experience in field (51.1%)	Specific discipline knowledge (63.7%)
9	Degree in advertising/marketing (48.9%)	Specific industry course (52.2%)
10	Internship (44.2%)	Creative portfolio (29.6%)
11	Creative portfolio (41.8%)	Degree in advertising/marketing (27.2%)

### Education

A university degree was considered essential for an entry-level hire by 30.2% of advertising professionals and 36.4% of PR professionals. PR practitioners thought that it was twice as essential for PR graduates (36.4%) than for advertising graduates (18.2%). There was a significant difference (.071) in the perceptions of the two practitioner groups on the question of the importance of a university degree for a creative position, with PR practitioners considering it more important than their advertising counterparts.

In terms of the content of this degree, a general university degree was considered more appropriate than a specific degree in advertising or marketing. There was a significant difference (.003) in the beliefs of the two practitioner groups of the applicability of a more specific degree for an entry level hire in PR, with PR practitioners considering that it was not important for PR position.

### Experience

Both groups thought specific discipline knowledge was almost equally important. However, some significant differences were recorded when it came to experience in the field. PR practitioners consider experience to be more important in all areas of employment than their advertising colleagues. This is shown in Table 2.

**Table 3: Importance of Experience in the field by Entry-level Job**

		Mean	Significance
Advertising	Advertisers	2.35	.008
	PR	1.57	
Media	Advertisers	2.28	.007
	PR	1.48	
Public Relations	Advertisers	2.16	.137
	PR	1.75	
Creative	Advertisers	2.23	.017
	PR	1.57	

Another measure of experience in terms of an entry level hire might be an internship or real world project. Again there were significant differences between advertising and PR employers in terms of the importance of the internship to entry-level hires in advertising (.005), media (.011) and creative (.010). PR practitioners considered the internship more significantly more important than their advertising colleagues.

### **Generic Skills**

Communication skills and personality traits were the two skills rated most important by both employers when choosing entry level staff. Strategic or analytical thinking was also rated equally important. Research skills were considered to be most essential for media people. There was a significant difference in the advertising and PR practitioners' perceptions of the importance of research skills for media (.061) and creative (.019) with PR practitioners considering research skills more important in these two vocations.

## **Discussion**

### **How different are the recruitment priorities of advertising and PR employers?**

There are many similarities and some significant differences in the priorities of both advertising and public relations employers. Their top three priorities are the same generic skills – communications skills, personality traits and strategic or analytical thinking. However, there are some significant differences between the two groups, with PR practitioners assigning more importance to practical aspects such as experience in the field and internships. Advertising practitioners consider specific discipline knowledge more important than experience.

### **Do advertising and PR employers see their counterpart's needs as being different?**

Public relations employers tend to think that advertising graduates require less strategic skills than public relations graduates. They felt that a university degree, communication skills, personality traits and strategic or analytical thinking were more important for PR recruits than for their advertising counterparts. Advertising practitioners considered the skills of entry level recruits to be more consistent across the two disciplines.

## **Further Research and Conclusions**

This research has demonstrated the priorities of advertising and PR employers are similar in terms of generic skills and the importance of a university degree. However, PR practitioners have shown a clear preference for experience, either in the field or through internship placements and practical projects. Further research could explore the ability of universities to meet these employer ideals. It would be also interesting to survey the other key stakeholder in the education process and determine student expectations of the recruitment process.

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